

Taking Care of Doris

In the Cardiac Care Unit

Although almost 25 years have passed since my residency days, I still remember the code blue and cardiopulmonary resuscitation involving George. He was undergoing monitoring and treatment in our cardiac care unit, in his final days of ischemic cardiomyopathy. He was an 80-year-old man who still enjoyed driving his brand-new light green Pontiac and spending time in the company of his wife of 50 years, Doris.

George's malignant ventricular activity was so intense that he was having manifestations of hemodynamic compromise. While evaluating him with a consulting cardiologist, I suddenly noticed a straight line on the electrocardiographic (ECG) monitor. Immediately, the 2 of us—both duly certified in advanced cardiac life support, in Internal Medicine/Pulmonology, and in Internal Medicine/Cardiology—went to work, feeling confident that we could provide George the care he needed. While the cardiologist was massaging George's heart but before I had time to intubate him, George regained consciousness, opening his eyes and exhibiting a good pulse pressure and an organized ECG complex in a P-QRS-T sequence on the monitor. The cardiologist and I reacted with surprise and halted our efforts at resuscitation. As soon as the cardiac massage was interrupted, however,

George again went into malignant ventricular dysrhythmia, losing his pulse pressure on the monitor and rolling back his eyes. Again cardiac massage was initiated and again George regained consciousness, only to lapse back into unconsciousness and ventricular dysrhythmia once cardiac massage ceased; this process was to be repeated several more times. I never did have the chance to intubate him.

What I remember most from this episode was what George said to me while on his second round of cardiac massage: "Please, my dear doctor, let me die. I have had a good life. Don't put me on a ventilator. But take good care of my wife, Doris." Although we were able to resuscitate him a few more times, we finally acceded to George's wishes.

I was Doris' personal physician for the next 23 years and last made a house call when she was dying at home here in Natick. She lived in a little house by the town's cemetery, and the light green Pontiac was still parked in her garage. I will always remember George's mandate and his lesson: to avoid futile care at the end of life . . . to love one's wife beyond this life.

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